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ABSTRACT

The struggle in the composition community regarding the place of personal narrative in academic writing became particularly acute for a class of undergraduate Critical Writing students undertaking ethnographic work. By mid-semester, students had read and produced a series of texts about culture and found themselves reading and writing about culture as if it were a text. First, students wrote position papers about whether what they had done up to that point was ethnography. In a later "thick description" assignment, students employed the work of Clifford Geertz, whose theories they had examined, as a resource. One student's essay is discussed as showing that the student had developed a certain kind of descriptive expertise; moreover, the essay showed a recognition that the work of the piece had only begun once the story of a personal experience had been recorded. The writing went beyond description of the experience to critical analysis of its significance. The use of ethnographic writing in instruction may allow a new view of the importance of teaching and learning about writing. (SG)

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Not Just Story Collecting: Towards a Critical Ethnography

Despite the claim of my title, I would like to begin by collecting together some stories about last year's Chair's Address in Boston. As a Chair's Address it was, for many, a curious way to convene a conference on composition, since the Chair devoted the time to discussing his mother's stroke and her painful attempts to resume writing. Coming after Jane Peterson's address the previous year, which had sought to focus attention on the difficult working conditions experienced by those teaching composition, it seemed at the time as if--in the space of a single year--the organization had moved away from addressing the material conditions that influence all those who labor in the profession in order to occupy some more personal and private realm.

As the most recent issues of both *College English* and *College Composition and Communication* attest, the Chair's Address was not an isolated event, but rather a sign of the ongoing struggle in the discipline over what place personal narrative ought to have in academic writing. This struggle has been reproduced at many conferences in recent years, where narratives culled from student writing have been deployed either to showcase

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exemplary writing or to illustrate the difficulty of the human condition as experienced by college freshmen. While I have found many of these personal accounts moving and powerful on a certain level and felt that some even approached the heroic, most of them have left me wondering: what are we supposed to do in response to these stories about personal hardship and triumph in the classroom beyond "appreciate" them? What kind of work has gone into their production? And what kind of work are we supposed to do once we've heard them?

With these questions in mind, I want to discuss a moment when the problem of how to find a place for personal narrative in academic writing became particularly acute for my students when they started doing ethnographic work. Now, since ethnography requires students to collect and report on material that, like their own personal experience, they alone have access to, ethnography might appear at first glance to be an unlikely force for problematizing notions about the authenticity of personal experience or for illustrating the limits of personal narrative. In what follows, however, my interest will be to show how a certain kind of ethnographic work can do just this by helping us to see there is more we as teachers of composition can do with the stories our students collect than simply "appreciate" or "correct" them, and, conversely, that there is more our students can do with their own stories than simply record them for us to admire or sympathize with.

The student work I want to discuss was written in the middle

of a Critical Writing course I recently taught. At mid-semester, my students had read and produced a series of texts about culture and now found themselves confronted with the task of reading and writing about culture as if culture itself were a text. They began this difficult and perplexing work by reading Geertz's essay on "thick description," where Geertz defines the ethnographic enterprise as follows:

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript--foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior (10).

Before my students attempted such work themselves, they first wrote a position paper where they considered the writing they had already done in the course in light of what Geertz himself says "may seem a less than startling discovery," namely that what an ethnographer does is write (18). My students had been writing for over eight weeks, but, I asked them, had they also been doing ethnography?

In his position paper, "Does Bob Kenneweg Do Ethnography?," Bob compared ethnographic and critical writing in order to explain his experience in the course up to that point:

> Ethnographic writing is an attempt to get inside another society's culture; critical writing can be seen as an attempt to get inside an author's head. What are the personal structures and symbols he draws from that gives his writing a particular style, form and flair? This task isn't easy, either. The difficulty is not [and here Bob begins to play with Geertz's words, substituting "writing" where Geertz uses cognition] "ignorance as to how *writing* works...(but in) a lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which *his words* are signs."

While Bob proceeds from here to argue that ethnography and critical writing are implicitly connected activities and, thus, that he has, albeit unknowingly, been doing ethnography all along, not all the students reached the same happy conclusion. Chris Seppi, for instance, had this to say about her earlier work:

> As an ethnographer I attempted to observe, then record, and finally analyze two "structures of significance" as Marsh and Ehrenreich did:
>
> 1. the import of rock and roll on adolescents in Dillsburg, PA--early 60's.
>
> 2. the messages transmitted and received in *Ms.* magazine.
>
> I, and the rest of the class, seem to be able to observe and record, but we fall short as ethnographic anthropologists "explicating explications."

By beginning in this way, commencing our investigation of Geertz's essay at those places where the students had found a way in, we were able to ask what it would mean to produce writing that demonstrated a "familiarity with the imaginative universe" within which the actions of others are signs? Or writing that sought to engage in "explicating explications"?

This may well seem like a strange way to talk about writing; I know that at the time my students found it to be terribly so--and yet, in speaking in this odd, unmanageable way, we managed to move away from a kind of talk about writing that the students were much more familiar and comfortable with, a kind of talk that did little more than assess a piece of writing for it "clarity," its "use of support," or its "need for expansion." Since Geertz

did not discuss ethnographic writing in these terms--and, indeed, even seemed to valorize a certain kind of messiness and incompleteness--the students were forced to incorporate and to interpret his terms in order to fulfill the assignment and assess their own work. The result is not, as the excerpts from Bob's and Chris' essays show, necessarily smooth prose or the creation of a class consensus about how to read either Geertz' text or the work of the class as a whole. What gets produced instead of such clarity and consensus is a host of writing problems previously unknown to the students, problems that require them to situate their work in relation to another's, to write in unfamiliar ways, and to deploy unwieldy vocabulary--problems, in other words, that can't be solved simply by having the students "say more," or asking them to be more "personal" or, even, more "academic."

Perhaps paradoxically, because they had acquired this new set of writing problems, when the time came for the students to begin their own "thick description" projects, they were in a position to use Geertz as a resource not simply a reference. In the time that remains I would like to discuss one student's attempt to negotiate this task. As you will see, what emerges from this process is not a perfect essay as it is often conceived: Kirstin's writing offers neither a coherent reading of Geertz nor a neatly organized essay with a single point, well argued. Kirstin uses her writing to produce something much more valuable, I would maintain--she produces an essay that opens a space for her to do some thinking alongside Geertz, a place where

she can test his ideas and determine the benefits and limitations of ethnographic work in terms of her own experience. In other words, to return to where I began, Kirstin doesn't produce an essay that tells a story about a place she knows well, claps its hands together and declares itself done for the day, but rather she writes a piece that recognizes that its work has only begun once the story of her personal experience has been recorded.

The first three pages of Kirstin's essay, which describe the pharmacy where Kirstin is an intern, culminate with a story about the tensions that exist between interns and technicians at the pharmacy. In this story, Kirstin describes how she arrived early at work one day, set her belongings down at one of the work stations, only to be forced out of the station by a technician who arrived after her. There is much that I like about what Kirstin does with her story: as you can see from the excerpt I have provided, she makes it rich in significant detail; she attends to a language based conflict; and she skillfully deploys parentheses and quotation marks to comment on the action she describes. In short, Kirstin's story demonstrates a certain kind of descriptive expertise.

What interests me about Kirstin's essay, however, is that it doesn't conclude with this story, nor does it continue on in the same vein, describing in endless detail other conflicts that have taken place at the pharmacy. Instead, Kirstin goes on to consider what, as she terms it, "one can imply from this account." With this new agenda in place, the first order of business, as Kirstin

sees it, is to rule out the obvious explanation of the conflict over the work stations--that being that "the technicians just do not like the interns." This response is not viable, Kirstin explains, because:

> Our job or responsibility as an ethnographer will not allow us to accept this as our only answer. We are called to dig deeper, to interpret, to "thickly describe" the behavior demonstrated in the example here. To do this we must question and come up with other answers which in turn may unearth other issues yet unconsidered (3)

That Kirstin speaks of her "job or responsibility as an ethnographer" here is not insignificant, indicating, as it does, that she sees what lies ahead for her as a kind of work--her metaphors involve "digging" and "unearthing"--with demands that can't be met by the kind of descriptive writing she has proc ed in the first three pages of her essay.

In order to fulfill the demands of this other "job or responsibility," Kirstin revises her explanation of the event from the technicians "not liking" the interns to the technicians "resenting" the interns, a revision that moves the conflict out of the realm of the merely personal and into--what for Kirstin is an entirely uncharted area--the realm of the material and the cultural. By shifting her focus from the level of affect to the working conditions at the pharmacy, Kirstin discusses an array of forces behind this conflict that might be invisible or illegible to an outsider. She begins her investigation of this new realm by considering the issue of overtime:

> Perhaps [the techs] resent the interns because they have removed the need for overtime. Judging by the way

> many of the techs talk about needing the overtime, one can gather that they do not come from afluent backgrounds. They really want the overtime while to the interns, the day off is more important than the extra money....But with more people sharing the workload, the work gets done much faster, eliminating the need for the techs to work extra hours making time and a half. So in a sense, the interns are stealing some of the money the techs might have been making (4).

While some analyses would stop at this point, having found a compelling motivation for discord between the techs and the interns in the matter of overtime, Kirstin goes on to discuss in detail the ways in which this division between the two classes of workers gets reproduced at the level of age and education and, in turn, is further reinforced by differences in how the workers spend their leisure time, in their marital status, in their expectations for the future, and even in how they use language and negotiate the power/knowledge differential in the work place. However, as Kirstin articulates the multiply-textured layers of inference at play in the pharmacy, she, unlike Geertz, who claims never "to have gotten anywhere near to the bottom" of anything he has written about (29), feels confident by the end of her essay that the ultimate force behind the conflict resides in the different ways techs and interns look at the job.

> Although the techs do not seem very satisfied with their jobs, they take them very seriously. (So seriously that they take it home with them as Dorothy does.) This would explain perhaps why they guard their stations so staunchly. The station serves as a kind of office for them.
>
> The interns on the other hand view this job as a passing thing....Everyone is looking towards bigger, and most likely, better paying opportunities. No intern has claimed his or her own station or marked the objects within it. This demonstrates the point that no intern looks upon this job as permanent employment,

> whereas for the tech, this is his or her life's work (7-8).

This difference is of the greatest importance, Kirstin concludes, because:

> The social conflict that arises from the relationship between the techs and interns is an example of how our society acts on us and becomes culture. The relationship between techs and interns is socially backwards. We have been brought up thinking that the older person makes more money, holds the better job and has more responsibility and privileges. At Thrift, however, the intern is being groomed as a future pharmacist and thus is given more to do all while making a fairly comparable amount of money (8).

Obviously, there is much about Kirstin's essay that must remain a mystery to us, since we do not know, for instance, how and where it is responding to comments offered during the peer review process, to class discussion of the original draft, or to my marginal comments. Like all writing, the chemistry behind its production eludes final detection. Acknowledging this does not, however, make it impossible to discuss why I think the work Kirstin performs in this essay is important or my own sense of what helped to make this kind of work possible. In the excerpts I have cited, I have tried to provide you with a feeling for how Kirstin has gone beyond simply collecting and recording stories about her work place, in order to critically examine what before she might only have described. By setting aside the affective explanation for the conflict, Kirstin finds herself in a position to investigate how material conditions and cultural forces have combined to produce the conflict at her work place. By attending to these matters, Kirstin is fulfilling my definition of critical

work.

In concluding, I would like to suggest that one way to enable the production of this kind of ethnographic work--work that maintains what James Clifford has called "an orchestrated multivocal exchange"--is to require that students bring their observations into dialogue with the writings of others, to require, in other words, that the personal and the ethnographic remain separate from one another, but in dialogue with each other. In her retrospective, Kirstin herself describes how complying with this requirement influenced her writing:

> By using quotes by Geertz, I almost imagined a sort of dialogue existing between him and myself. I used his quotes to show the relationship between my topic and his essay on ethnography. By doing this, I felt as if I really was doing ethnography because I was able to use Geertz to back me up. My footing felt solid and certain--maybe because I was writing about a part of culture I was an active participant in (5).

Kirstin's positive assessment of the benefits accrued from placing her writing in "a sort of dialogue" with Geertz's work may seem simply pro forma at this point--after all, one might argue, if she wants a good grade, she <u>better</u> speak about the benefits of adopting this particular approach to writing. Rather than reject this way of describing what Kirstin is up to here, I would argue that her adoption of this particular strategy at this point is evidence of just how well she has learned to read the work of the course. That she concludes, in other words, not just by telling a story about how her writing has improved, but by adopting and deploying terms from the course to frame her own

experience in the course makes it clear to me that she has, indeed, done the work of the course.

It probably seems odd that, having begun by declaiming the resurgence of personal narratives in academic discourse, I have proceeded to tell what sounded suspiciously like a personal story about my classroom, one that doubly transgressed my argument by being a story about one of my student' stories. In telling this story about story-telling, I have acted on my conviction that one way to respond to the questions about personal narrative and ethnographic work that we have been taught by the critique of humanism to ask is not to abandon both the personal and the ethnographic altogether, but rather to use the insights and methods of ethnography to investigate, challenge, problematize, and, perhaps finally, even honor the personal narratives our students produce. This more intrusive, more critical use of ethnography may well run the risk, as Shirley Brice Heath has recently warned, "of demonstrating that fewer and fewer individuals...define themselves in terms of webs of significance they themselves spin, and [that] many may be caught without understanding, interpreting, or transmitting anything like the cultural patterns into which they themselves were socialized" (517). If so, our work and our students' work with ethnography may prove to be critical in yet another sense: it may allow us all to see in a new light the importance of the enterprise we're engaged in.

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